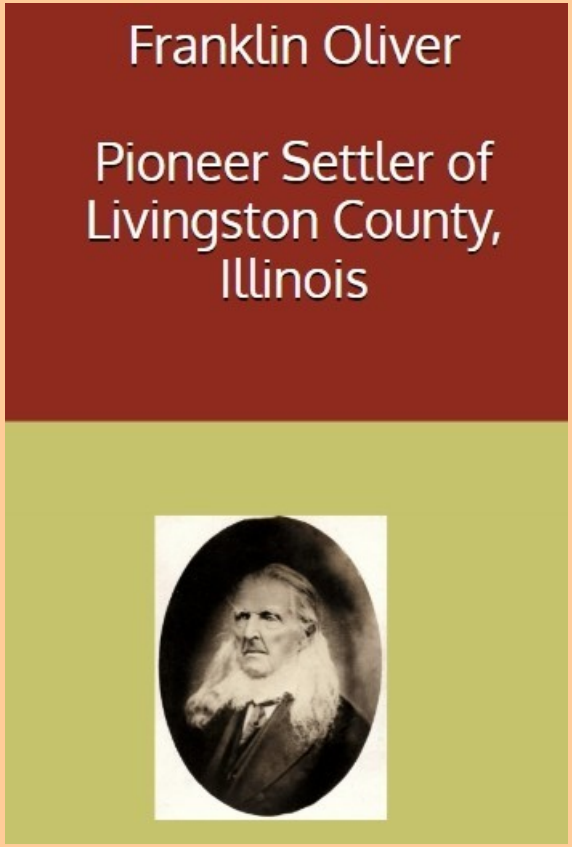
Franklin Oliver

for

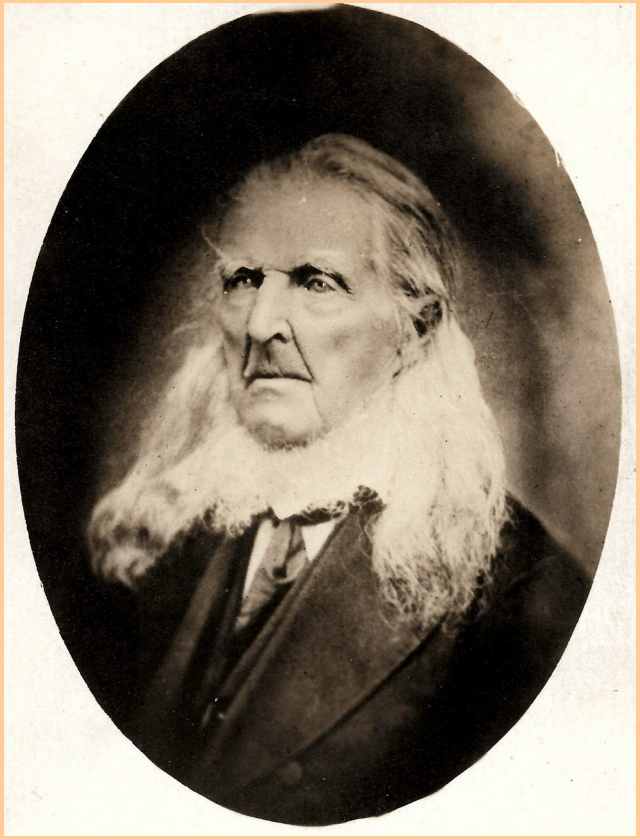
The Ford County Historical Society



By: Dale C. Maley

Fairbury, Illinois

March 2022



Franklin Oliver

- John A. Oliver (1733-1824) lived in Bordentown, New Jersey.
  - -Became friends with Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790).
  - -John Oliver served as a quartermaster in the Revolutionary War.

- Bordentown citizen Francis Hopkinson (1737-1791) was a patriot and signer of the Declaration of Independence.
  - -Hopkinson had artistic talents and helped design the first U.S. flag
  - -Wrote music, wrote poetry, sketched, and painted.
  - -Hopkinson painted a portrait of Benjamin Franklin.
  - -Mr. Franklin then gave the picture to his friend, John Oliver.
  - -Eventually, Franklin Oliver (1797-1881) inherited the portrait from his father.

- Franklin Oliver grew up in Bordentown and served as a Private in the War of 1812.
  - -He then worked for Joseph Bonaparte, older brother of Napoleon Bonaparte, when he built his estate in Bordentown.
  - -Franklin Oliver learned the craft of surveying on the estate

Franklin Oliver

- In 1832, Franklin Oliver became one of the pioneer settlers of Livingston County, Illinois.

- He surveyed new towns and selected some of the best lands to purchase. As a result, he accumulated over 4,000 acres of land in Livingston and Ford Counties.

- Franklin Oliver was married three times and had nine children. He lived a very colorful life in Illinois.

Franklin Oliver

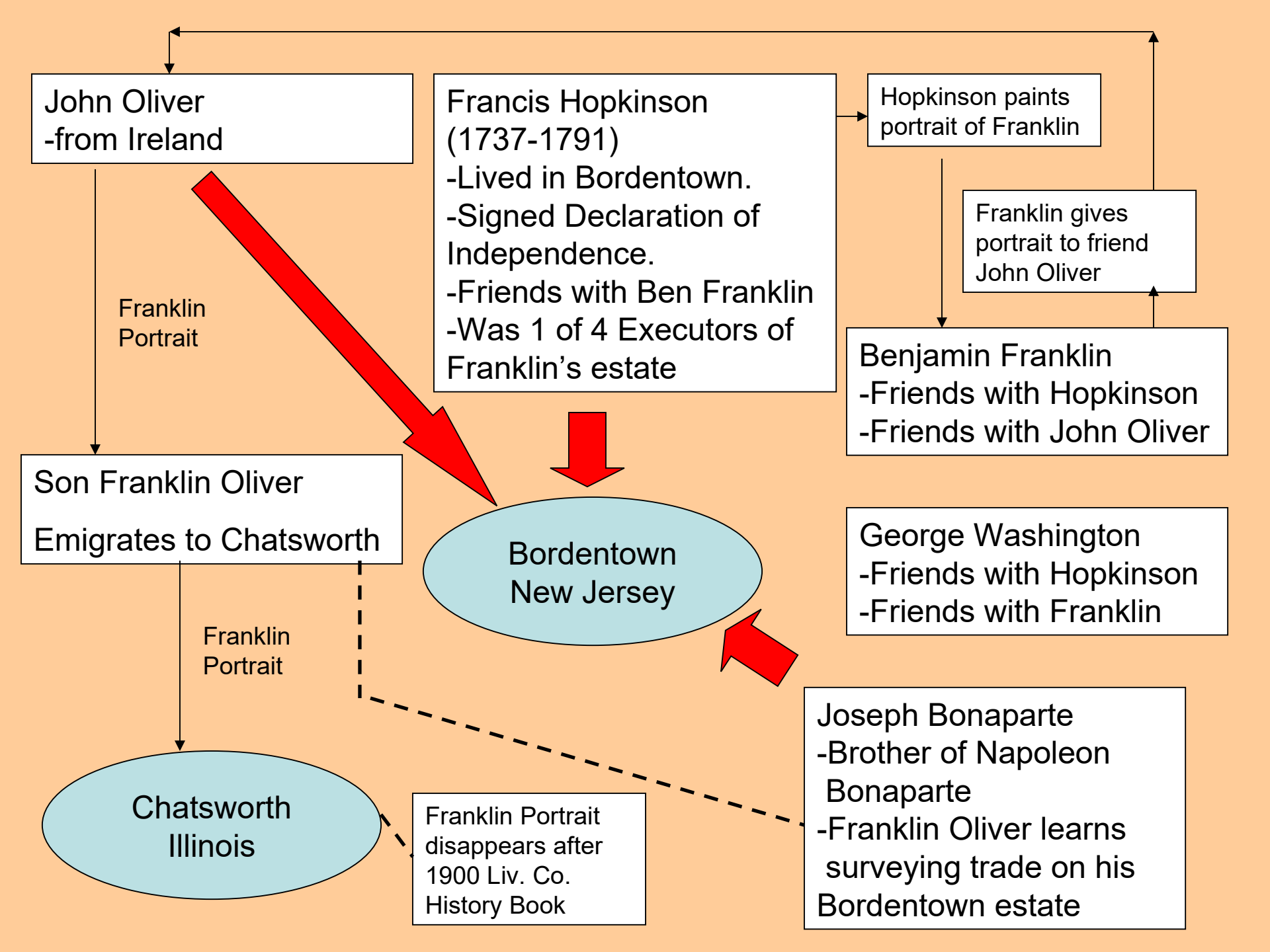
Rumors and Tales

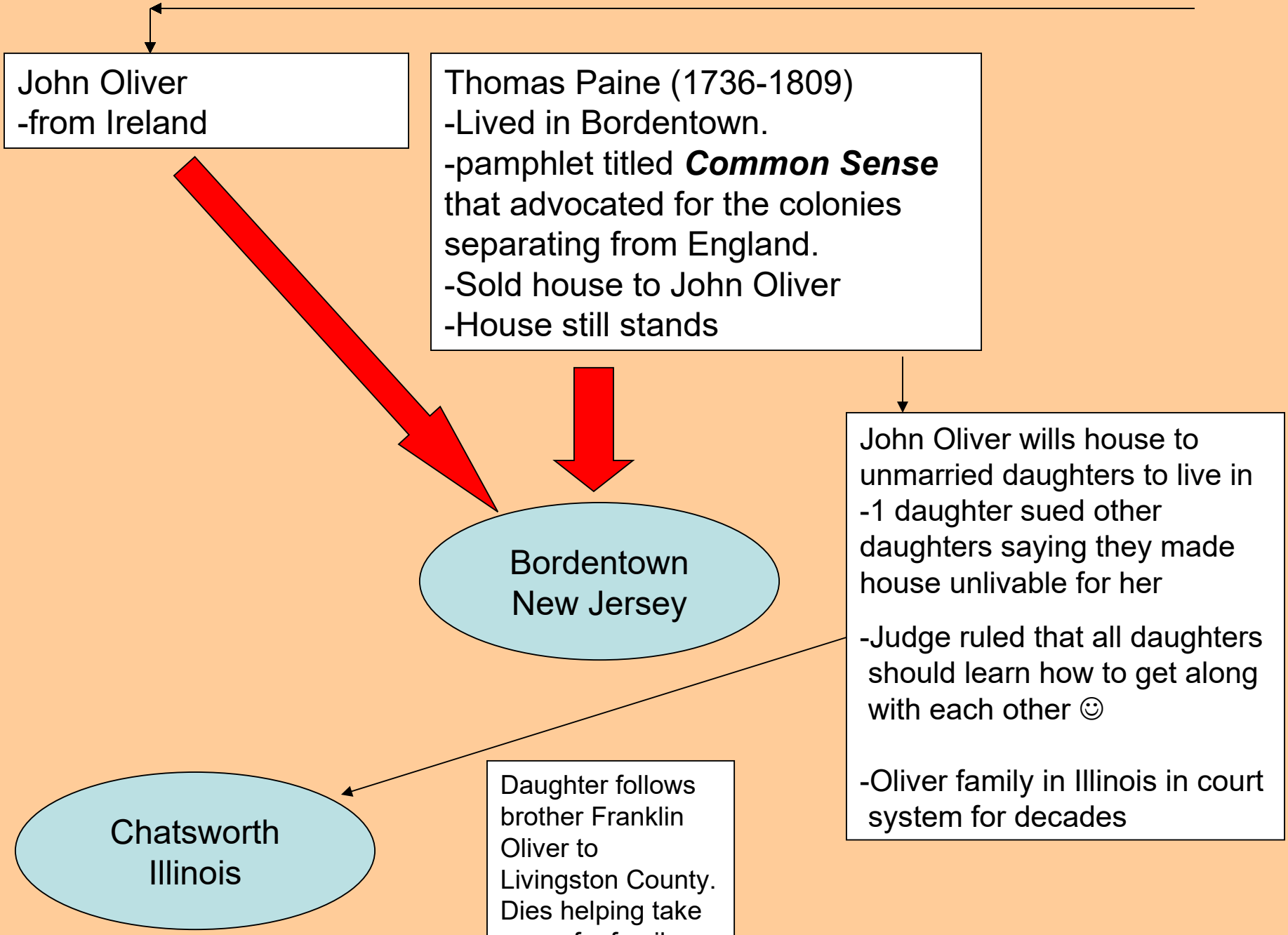
•In writing previous history books, the author only published information found from written sources.

•In the case of Franklin Oliver, one existing book and several newspaper articles tell of several rumors and tales about Franklin Oliver. The Oliver family also recounted several family stories to book authors or newspaper reporters.

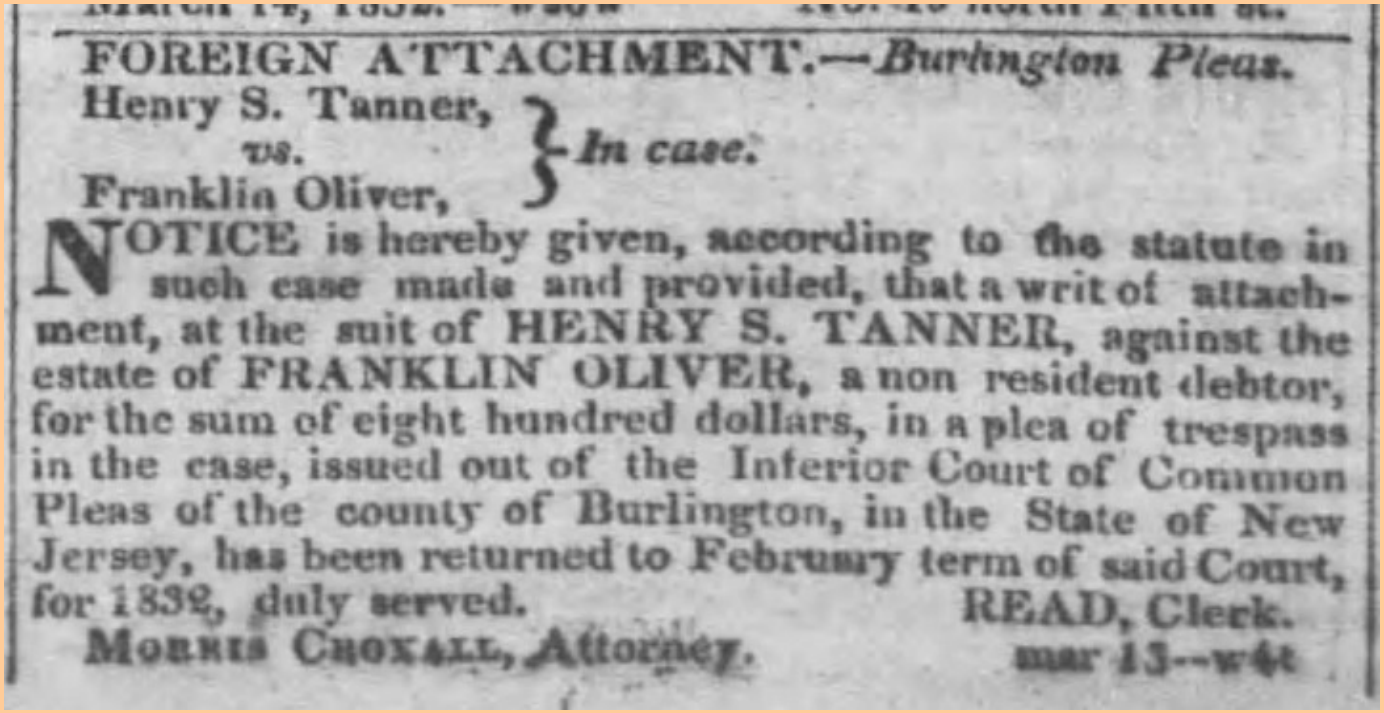
•This information was carefully reviewed for historical accuracy. If no evidence was found to support these stories, this conclusion was so noted.

Franklin Oliver


John Oliver
-from Ireland
Francis Hopkinson
(1737-1791)
-Lived in Bordentown.
-Signed Declaration of Independence.
-Friends with Ben Franklin
-Was 1 of 4 Executors of Franklin's estate
Hopkinson paints portrait of Franklin
Franklin gives portrait to friend John Oliver
Franklin Portrait
Benjamin Franklin
-Friends with Hopkinson
-Friends with John Oliver
Son Franklin Oliver
Emigrates to Chatsworth
Bordentown New Jersey
George Washington
-Friends with Hopkinson
-Friends with Franklin
Franklin Portrait
Joseph Bonaparte
-Brother of Napoleon Bonaparte
-Franklin Oliver learns surveying trade on his Bordentown estate
Chatsworth Illinois
Franklin Portrait disappears after 1900 Liv. Co. History Book


John Oliver
-from Ireland
Thomas Paine (1736-1809)
-Lived in Bordentown.
-pamphlet titled ***Common Sense*** that advocated for the colonies separating from England.
-Sold house to John Oliver
-House still stands
Bordentown
New Jersey
John Oliver wills house to unmarried daughters to live in
-1 daughter sued other daughters saying they made house unlivable for her
-Judge ruled that all daughters should learn how to get along with each other ☺
-Oliver family in Illinois in court system for decades
Chatsworth
Illinois
Daughter follows brother Franklin Oliver to Livingston County. Dies helping take care of a family.

Source of Funding for Illinois Land Purchases?



FOREIGN ATTACHMENT.—*Burlington Pleas.*

Henry S. Tanner,
vs.
Franklin Oliver,
} *In case.*

NOTICE is hereby given, according to the statute in such case made and provided, that a writ of attachment, at the suit of HENRY S. TANNER, against the estate of FRANKLIN OLIVER, a non resident debtor, for the sum of eight hundred dollars, in a plea of trespass in the case, issued out of the Inferior Court of Common Pleas of the county of Burlington, in the State of New Jersey, has been returned to February term of said Court, for 1832, duly served.

READ, Clerk.

MORRIS CHOXALL, Attorney. mar 13--w4t

- Apparently, Franklin Oliver had left Bordentown prior to March of 1832 while owing Mr. Tanner $800.

- This debt would be equivalent to $21,000 in 2021 dollars.

•With respect to Livingston County history, 1832 is the pivotal year for Franklin Oliver.

•In early 1832, he decided to move his family from New Jersey to Livingston County, Illinois. In 1832, his family members and their ages are shown below.

Franklin Oliver 35
Hannah Oliver 32
Edward R. Oliver 13
Helen F. Oliver 10
Elias B. Oliver 9
Franklin C. Oliver 5
James Oliver 1

- Oliver family stopped for the night about 3 miles south of present day Chatsworth
- Next thing they knew, they were surrounded by Kickapoo Indians!
- They lived 3 miles south of Fairbury from 1828-1830, then moved 10 miles east to south of Chatsworth 1830-1832. Forced to leave state after Black Hawk War
- Franklin made exception and agreed to smoke a pipe with the Kickapoo Chief
- Franklin stayed when other settlers went to Indiana during Black Hawk War

Definition of Best Land

•Today, Livingston County farm land is valued by its crop production productivity in terms of bushels of corn or soybeans produced per acre.

•Pioneer settlers in the 1800s had a completely different definition of good land. They defined good land as being located next to water and having timber growing on it.

•A check was performed to see how closely pioneers followed this guideline when they settled the three townships that today make up the Fairbury area (Avoca, Indian Grove, and Belle Prairie).

-In every single case, each pioneer farmer settled next to Indian Creek or the Vermilion River.

•Prior to the 1880s, most of the land in Livingston County was swampy.
-Because of this, Livingston County was one of the last counties to be populated in Illinois.
-In the 1880s, clay tile was introduced and it drained the swamps.

•Ironically, the land that was thought to be the most valuable in the 1800s is now considered the poorest land available. The worthless swamp land in the 1800s is now some of the most valuable farmland on the planet.

•Franklin Oliver would have considered farmland next to water with a lot of timber as the most valuable in Livingston County.

How Much Farmland did Franklin Oliver Own?

- There are 2 primary databases that show land purchased from the federal government
  - -Federal Bureau of Land Management
  - -Illinois State records

- Of course, the format of the 2 databases is different ☹

- Reconciling differences in the 2 databases showed Franklin purchased 4,711 acres

- This is close to the roughly 5,000 acres that is reported in many historical sources

- 4,711 acres is equivalent to 7.4 square miles of land

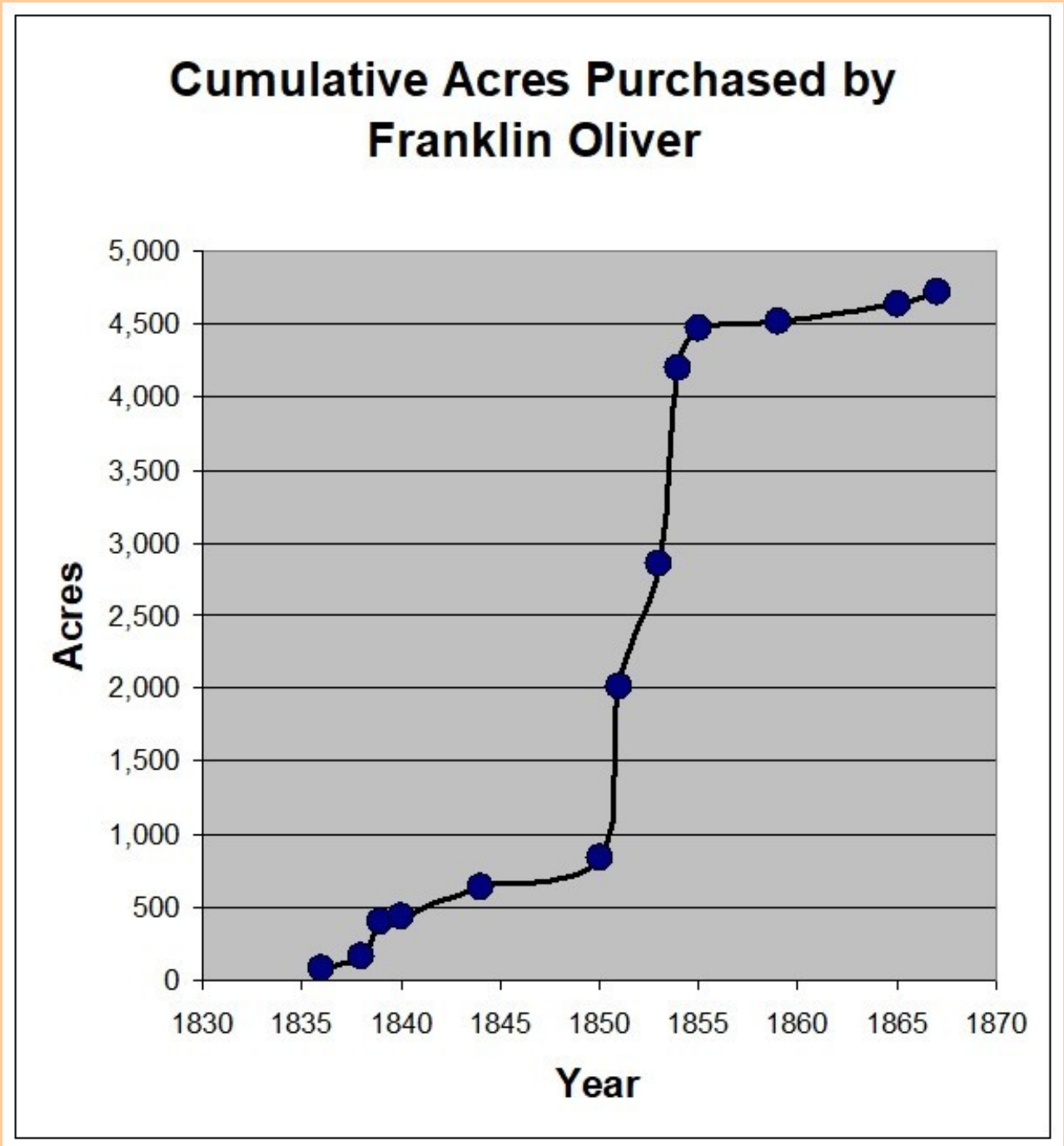
Land Prices

•The official price of land purchased from the government in Illinois started out at $1.25 and acre and increased to $2.50 per acre by the 1850s. The $2.50 price in 1850 would be equivalent to $79/acre in today's dollars.

•Congress passed laws which awarded land to veterans of wars. For example, they passed a law in 1850 which granted the right to obtain free land for veterans of the War of 1812.

•Most of these veterans did not live in Illinois and they had no interest in moving to the swamp lands of Central Illinois. They sold their rights typically for 10 cents on the dollar of the official government price.

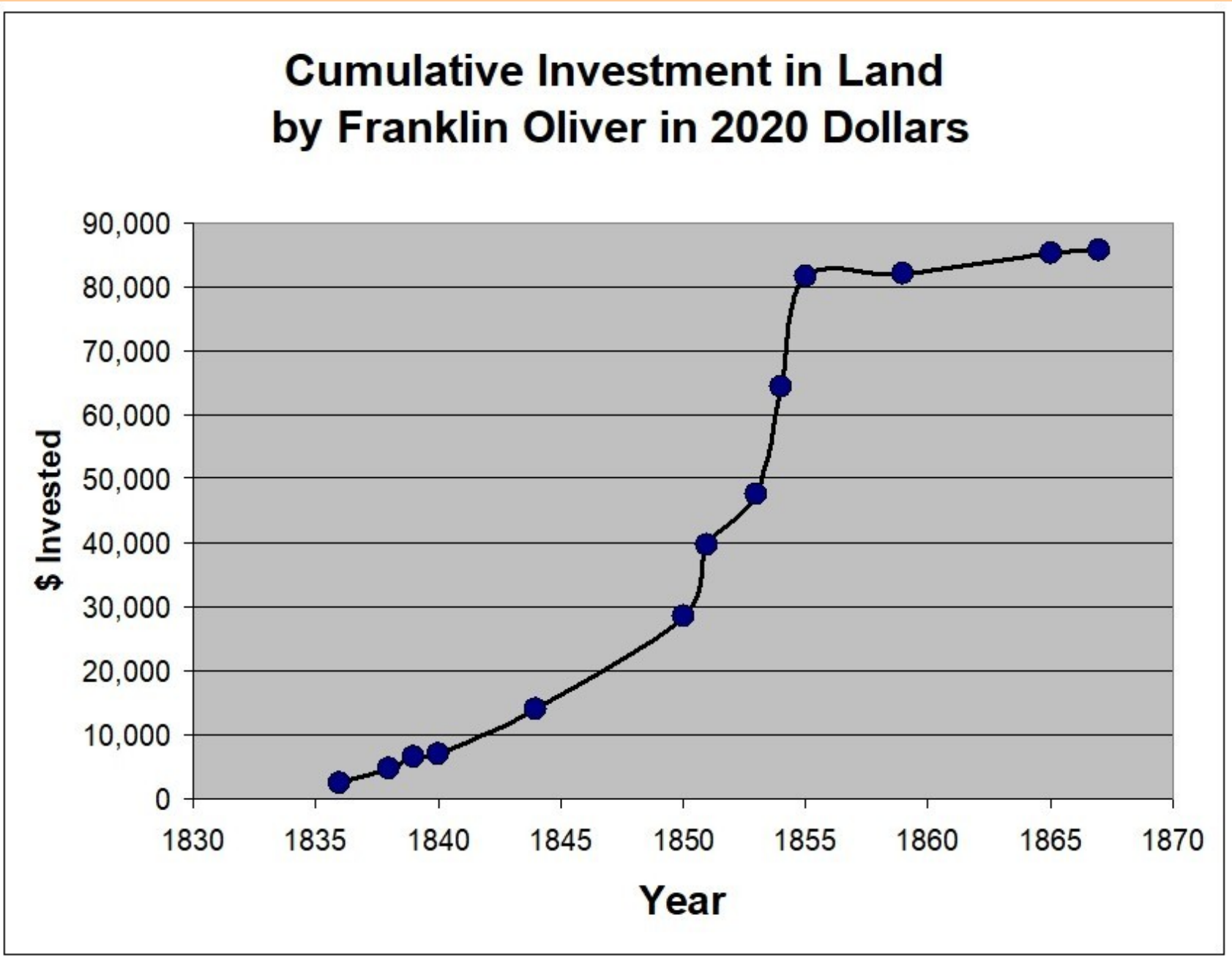
•In nearby Fairbury, Dr. Lorenzo Beach purchased some land using military veteran land patents for 30 cents per acre. He paid a cash price of $2.50 per acre to purchase other land. The 30 cent military patent price was 12 cents on the dollar of the official price of $2.50 per acre.

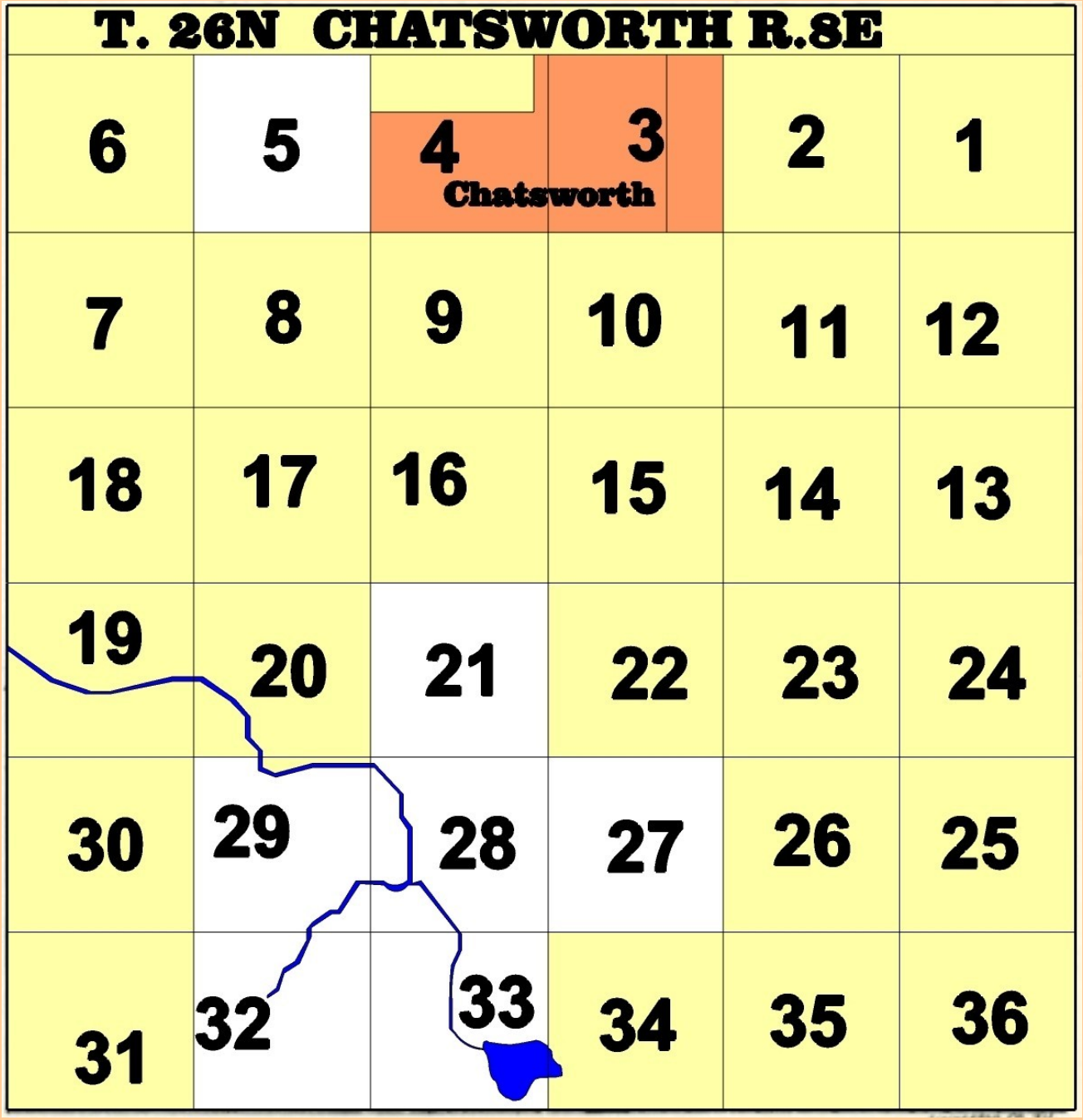


1850 Script Act caused land rush in Livingston County.

Most of the land claimed by 1860 when it ended.

Oliver had to act quickly before the land was all claimed


Cumulative Investment in Land
by Franklin Oliver in 2020 Dollars
$ Invested
90,000
80,000
70,000
60,000
50,000
40,000
30,000
20,000
10,000
0
1830
1835
1840
1845
1850
1855
1860
1865
1870
Year


T. 26N CHATSWORTH R.8E
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Chatsworth
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1848

•Franklin Oliver married a second time to Miss Sarah Wirtz on April 24, 1848. This marriage is documented by the Illinois Compiled Marriage list available from Ancestry.com.

•When Oliver married for the second time, the ages of his family were as shown below.

Franklin Oliver 51
Sarah Wirtz 28
Edward Oliver 29
Helen Oliver 26
Elias Oliver 25
Franklin C. Oliver 21
James Oliver 17

Franklin and Sarah Oliver had one child. Her name was Caroline Oliver (1849-1936). Her first husband was Ephraim Hunnicutt and her second husband was Theodore Dorr. No children resulted from either marriage.

1850

First Wife Dies

Franklin Oliver's first wife, Hannah Rockhill, died in 1850 at the age of 50.

Second Marriage Only Lasted Two Years

Franklin Oliver married his second wife, Miss Sarah Wirtz on April 24, 1848. They divorced by 1850. She died in 1855 and was only 35 years of age when she passed away. Daughter Caroline Oliver was only six years old when her mother died.

Third Marriage

Franklin Oliver married for the third time on October 2, 1850. He married Amaretta Smith. She was just 17 years old when she married 63 year old Franklin Oliver.

Franklin Oliver and Amaretta Smith had three children.

Revilo Oliver Sr. 1853-1929
John Lewis Oliver 1858-1916
Florence F. Oliver 1873-1943

Revilo is Oliver spelled backwards

REVILO OLIVER.

MISS GERTIE ROSS.

The Author's Little Niece.

Daughter of Florence Oliver - Ross

Sullivant Clashes With Franklin Oliver

- Franklin Oliver owned 4,711 acres
- Mr. Sullivant owned 40,000 acres where Sibley now is

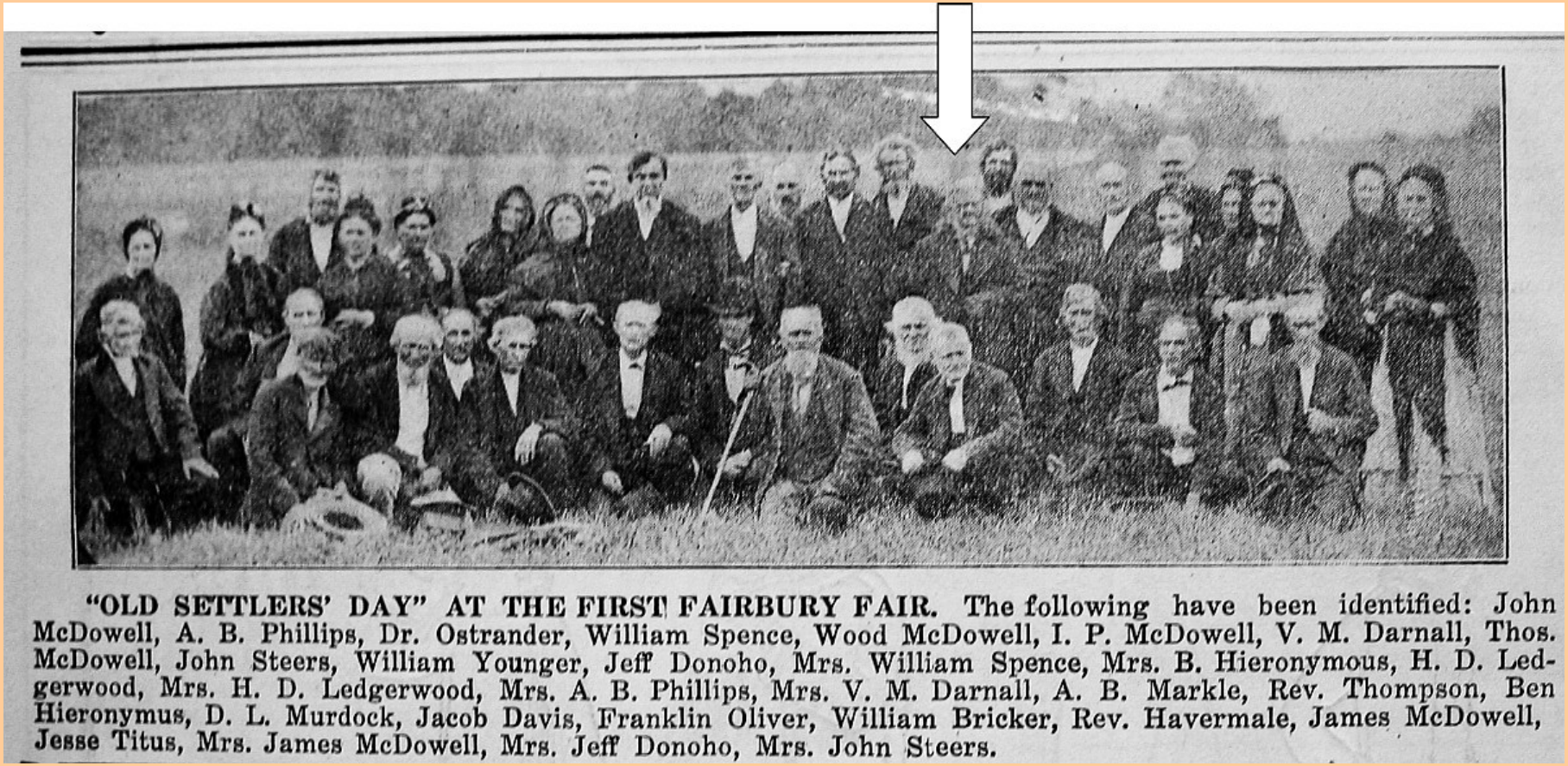
Even with all his property, Sullivant wasn't satisfied. It seems a neighbor of his, Franklin Oliver, owned a 4,500 acre tract that Sullivant wanted.

-Five foot Franklin Oliver, who settled on this land in 1832, living there with the Kickapoo Indians, haggled for years with six footer Sullivant over the purchase price.

Both men banked in Gilman, where bankers reported they came to within $100 of agreeing on the price.

What finally quashed the deal was Sullivant's statement to Oliver that he intended making the land into a hog lot. Oliver took this as a personal insult.

1876



"OLD SETTLERS' DAY" AT THE FIRST FAIRBURY FAIR. The following have been identified: John McDowell, A. B. Phillips, Dr. Ostrander, William Spence, Wood McDowell, I. P. McDowell, V. M. Darnall, Thos. McDowell, John Steers, William Younger, Jeff Donoho, Mrs. William Spence, Mrs. B. Hieronymous, H. D. Ledgerwood, Mrs. H. D. Ledgerwood, Mrs. A. B. Phillips, Mrs. V. M. Darnall, A. B. Markle, Rev. Thompson, Ben Hieronymus, D. L. Murdock, Jacob Davis, Franklin Oliver, William Bricker, Rev. Havermale, James McDowell, Jesse Titus, Mrs. James McDowell, Mrs. Jeff Donoho, Mrs. John Steers.

Franklin Oliver was reported as being about 5 Feet 0 inches tall.

Last Five Years of Life

In 1876, Franklin Oliver was 89 years old.

-His wife, Amaretta, was 43 years of age.

-At this point, they had been married 26 years and Amaretta had borne three of his children.

•Oliver would live five more years and die in 1881 at the age of 94.

-During the last five years of his life, he would make national newspaper headlines and be embroiled in many legal disputes.

- 1876…..divorce suit filed

- 1877…….house burned down

- 1879……..3rd wife granted a divorce
  -she got 400 acres

- 1879…….92 year old Franklin Oliver travels back to Bordentown
  -old 1831 Eminent Domain lawsuit where he claimed the railroad took his family's land

- 1880…robbed and beaten at his Chatsworth home, thieves got $600

- 1880……tried to get a Bordentown woman to marry him, he was 93
  -she turned him down

- 1880……son Revilo sues him.

Makes National News in 1881

- 94 year-old Franklin Oliver proposed marriage to 30 year old Saybrook woman
  - -offered her farmland if she would marry him
  - -she initially said yes……
  - -but called off the marriage when she found out his children had him declared incompetent and his land was placed in conservator ship

Franklin Oliver died on September 19, 1881 at 94 years of age

The Family Story Goes On

- Judge Payson of Pontiac buys land from Oliver
  -Pays 10% of what it is worth

- Franklin Oliver dies
  -descendants sue Judge Payson that he stole the land from senile Franklin Oliver

- Judge Payson wins first case in Pontiac
  -Appealed to Illinois Supreme Court

- Supreme Court ordered Payson to return the land and admonished him for several things including buying land from a client and taking advantage of a senile man.

The Family Story Goes On

- Revilo lives with his mother in Chatsworth after his death
- Gorgeous young Bloomington blonde woman comes to Chatsworth, “Maud”
- She befriends both Revilo and his mother
- She tells story that her brothers hold land in trust for her, but won’t release it until she marries someone with land.
- If Franklin Oliver’s widow signs her land over to son Revilo, then she and Revilo can get married

The Family Story Goes On

- They get married
- Revilo has her followed back to Bloomington the day after their wedding
- Discovers that she had sex with at least three men the day after her wedding
- Revilo files for immediate divorce

- Revilo's sister later says in court filing that Maude was a prostitute

The Family Story Goes On

- Revilo and mother move to Texas
- Revilo does newspaper advertisement for someone to convert his poetry to music
- A woman replies to the ad, goes to Texas and marries Revilo
- Revilo's sister in Indiana travels to Texas
  - -Tells Revilo and their mother that new bride is a prostitute like Maud
  - -Convinces elderly mother and Revilo to sign over all land to her…….which they did!!
  - -Sister takes train from Texas to Pontiac and enters transaction at Courthouse
- Revilo realized he made a mistake and sued sister to get the land back

The Family Story Goes On

- In 1929, at the age of 75, Revilo Oliver Sr. committed suicide by hanging himself in the basement of his Springfield, Illinois, home.

- At the time of his death, his wife, Flora Oliver, was 51 years old. His son, Revilo P. Oliver, was 21 years of age.

The Family Story Goes On

- Revilo Oliver had a son and named him Revilo P. Oliver

- He became Professor at University of Illinois

- Was founding member of right-wing group called John Birch Society

- After President Kennedy's assassination, Professor Oliver published controversial article….alleging the Russians had Kennedy shot because he had agreed with the Russians to convert America to Communism, but President Kennedy was not acting fast enough on this plan to suit the Russians.

The Family Story Goes On

- General public was still grieving at the loss of a very popular President Kennedy

- Public was outraged and wanted Professor Oliver fired from the University of Illinois.

- U of I officials decided not to fire him.

- Professor Oliver eventually retired from U of I.
  - -Became very ill
  - -Committed suicide like his father

<u>Not True</u> Myths About Franklin Oliver

1. Franklin Oliver was ¼ Indian and that is why he got along so well with the Kickapoo in Chatsworth.
   (His family tree has no Native Americans in it)

2. As each new child was born, Franklin Oliver would take out his pocket knife and notch the ear of the baby to mark the child as belonging to his family.
   (There is no evidence to support this myth)

3. Franklin Oliver married a Kickapoo woman and that is why he got along so well with that tribe.
   (Franklin Oliver's 3 marriages are well documented)

<u>Not True</u> Myths About Franklin Oliver

4. Franklin Oliver would invited travelers to spend the night at his farm, then murder them and steal their possessions. He would burn their wagon and put the iron wheel rims on a big stack he kept behind his house.
   (No historical substantiation)

5. People disappeared in the quicksand on his property.
   (No historical substantiation)

6. Oliver miss-treated his wives
   (No historical substantiation)

Unsolved Franklin Oliver Mysteries

1. Did Benjamin Franklin give his portrait painted by Francis Hopkinson to his friend John Oliver, father of Franklin Oliver?

2. How did Franklin Oliver learn the surveying trade, and did he work on Joseph Bonaparte's estate?

3. Where did Franklin Oliver live between his War of 1812 service and when he moved to Illinois?

4. Why did Franklin Oliver owe Mr. Tanner $21,000 Back in New Jersey?

5. Where did Franklin Oliver get the cash to make his many land purchases in Illinois?

Unsolved Franklin Oliver Mysteries

6. Who was Mary Wood that purchased land jointly with Franklin Oliver in 1839?

7. What is the rest of the story about the New Jersey Railroad using eminent domain to take land away from the Oliver family in 1831?

8. Unexplained Causes of Death for First Wife

9. Unexplained Cause of Death for Second Wife

10. What was Franklin Oliver's farming business model?

11. Where was Franklin Oliver Buried in 1881?

Unsolved Franklin Oliver Mysteries

12. What Happened to the Portrait of Benjamin Franklin?

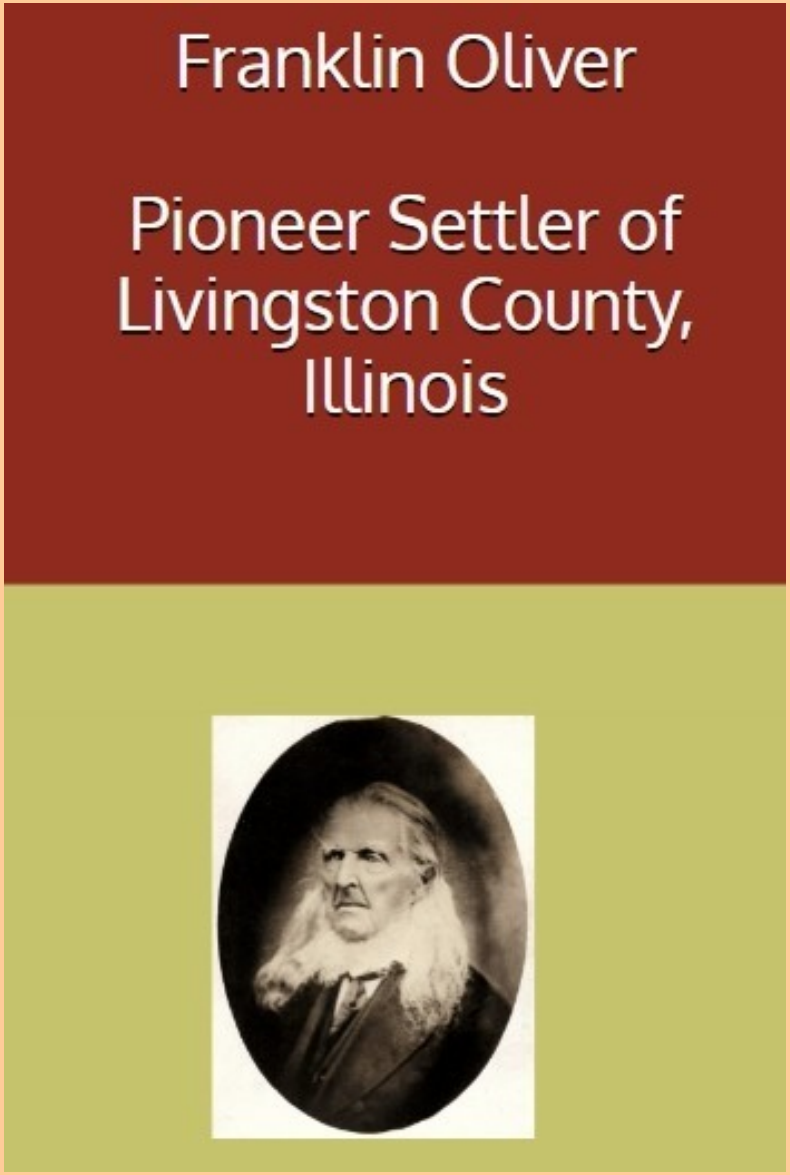
13. Why Did Florence Oliver – Ross Board Her First Child with Her Mother and Revilo Oliver in Chatsworth?

14. What Is the Life Story of Maude Swope – Barlow?

15. Why Were So Many Rumors Started About Franklin Oliver?

Summary

- Writing the book was a challenging project
- Involved so much early "East Coast" Revolutionary War characters
- Future researchers may be able to solve many of the mysteries about his life.
- YouTube video at https://tinyurl.com/2p8fnbty



Questions?